

News Release

Top Aggies Recognized during NWSA Alumni Reunion

By Elizabeth Tollefson on Monday, June 29, 2015



Three outstanding alumni from the Northwest School of Agriculture were honored during the annual alumni reunion recently held at the University of Minnesota Crookston. Some 170 alumni and guests were on hand on Saturday, June 27, 2015, for the day's activities and to reconnect with classmates and friends.

The Top Aggie award recognizes alumni who have displayed outstanding commitment and service to community, church, education, family, or in their occupational field. The 2015 Top Aggies included LeRoy Sondrol 1955, William "Buzz" Baldwin 1965, and Larry Wilkens 1965. They were honored during a luncheon held at noon on Saturday. U of M Crookston Chancellor Fred Wood brought greetings from the campus and Director of Development & Alumni Relations Corby Kemmer presented the recipients with their Top Aggie awards.

During the day, alumni took advantage of bus tours of campus, class meetings and photographs, the Top Aggie luncheon, and a social, dinner, and dance in the evening that included music from the era.

Top Aggie Biographies

LeRoy Sondrol

LeRoy Sondrol 1955 began working for the University of North Dakota (UND) in Grand Forks, N.D., in 1956 as a grounds person, became head of the Plant Services department in 1973, and later, became assistant vice president for operations. In times of great stress, his leadership was invaluable. He gave direction to UND as it recovered from the historic 1997 flood and led efforts to bring the campus back to full operation within six months.

From 1959-1965, he served in the U.S. military with the 311<sup>th</sup> Medical Core and was honorably discharged with the rank of staff sergeant.

Sondrol was awarded the National Energy Conservation Award by the Secretary of Energy and was a member of the Association of Physical Plant Administration (APPA) board for two years and a member for 23 years. He also served as president of the Central States Regional APPA for a year during his 24 years on their board. In 1998, he was awarded the Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service.

He has given generously of his time to his community and church holding leadership positions in a number of organizations. Sondrol is currently serving for a second time as a member of the alumni board for the Northwest School of Agriculture and was on the board for the Northlands Rescue Mission for seven years. He was part of the National Science Award Granting Panel in Washington, D.C.

Memories of the Northwest School are special for Sondrol. He credits classmates and friends, along with the encouragement of faculty members, with helping him stay the course to graduation. He has particular fondness for his wrestling coach Mr. Kruta and a highlight for him was serving as one of the co-captains of the successful wrestling team and becoming the state champ in his weight class.

Buzz Baldwin

Agriculture has been a way of life for William "Buzz" Baldwin 1965 and raising wheat, edible beans, soybeans, and sugarbeets continues to be the focus of this farmer from St. Thomas, N.D.

He has also given of his time and talents to his community as a member of the St. Thomas American Legion Post #41, a member of the St. Thomas Booster Club, and the rural fire department. Baldwin served three terms as president of the St. Thomas Public School Board.

In 1980, he was selected as North Dakota Outstanding Young Farmer. He helped organize the North Dakota Dry Edible Bean Council, served on the Drayton Factory District Sugarbeet Board for twelve years, and on the Advisory Board for the Bank of North Dakota. He was appointed by President George Bush as a Farm Service Agency director, a position he held for eight years.

A lifelong agriculture advocate, Baldwin has spent many hours on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., lobbying legislators for farm and sugar policies. He was a member of the board of directors for American Crystal Sugar for four terms.

His time at the Northwest School of Agriculture gave him many friendships that continue today. Along with friendships, the expertise of the faculty members at the school influenced his life in everything from horticulture to politics.

Larry Wilkens

Service and education are hallmarks in the life of Larry Wilkens 1965. After graduation, he started at the University of Minnesota but his education was interrupted when he returned to the family farm to help. He resumed work on his education at the University of Minnesota and also become a police officer for the City of Minneapolis.

Wilkens joined the United States Army serving at Fort Rucker, Alabama, and in Vietnam. After the military, he returned to the Minneapolis Police Department and eventually to the University of Minnesota to earn his degree in agricultural business administration. Working in law enforcement, Wilkens was able to take advantage of numerous opportunities for training and education as well as attending Mankato State University to complete the course work on a master's in business administration.

His military service continued as a member of the Army Reserve serving as a personnel specialist. He was involved in the activation of a number of military units for deployment to Operation Desert Storm. Wilkens feels fortunate to have been able to serve his country and fellow soldiers during duty and in retirement.

He also has been active in the community with Boy Scouts of America and through fund raising activities for St. Albert the Great Catholic Church and School as well as his membership on their board of education. He played a role in his town home association in Apple Valley, Minn., and later in Mesa, Ariz., as part of their community association.

Campus living gave Wilkens tools that he has used unknowingly throughout his life. These were valuable lessons in learning to be responsible but he recalls how everyone learned to depend on one another and that teachers and staff were there to help and guide.

Background of the Northwest School of Agriculture

The NWSA alumni reunion, first held in 1918, brings back alumni from the Northwest School of Agriculture, a residential high school located on what is now the University of Minnesota, Crookston campus. The NWSA opened its doors in 1906 and graduated its first class of 8 students in 1909. The first Top Aggie award was given to Herschel Lysaker, a member of the staff at the Northwest School, in 1970 and it has been awarded annually since that time.

The University of Minnesota Crookston now delivers 33 bachelor's degree programs, 22 minors, and 36 concentrations on campus as well as 14 degree programs entirely online. These degrees are offered in the areas of agriculture and natural resources; business; liberal arts and education; and math, science and technology. With an enrollment of 1,800 undergraduates from more than 20 countries and 40 states, the Crookston campus offers a supportive, close-knit atmosphere that leads to a prestigious University of Minnesota degree. "Small Campus. Big Degree." To learn more, visit [www.umcrookston.edu](http://www.umcrookston.edu).

In the Top Aggie photo, left to right, are Chancellor Fred Wood; LeRoy Sondrol; William "Buzz" Baldwin; Larry Wilkens; and Corby Kemmer, director of Development & Alumni Relations.

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